



THIS STORY HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR EASY PRINTING

## Into high gear

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### With renovation of the 22-mile rail trail complete, it's smooth sailing from South Dennis to South Wellfleet

By Stephen Jermanok, Globe Correspondent | June 3, 2007

SOUTH DENNIS -- Fresh pavement to a biker is like early morning snow to a skier. You yearn to be the first one to sample the goods. So there I was last month in a cool ocean headwind pumping away on my bike on the newly refurbished Cape Cod Rail Trail. I zipped over bridges and through tunnels, past large ponds, salt marsh, and cranberry bogs, breathing in the sweet smell of spring wildflowers and the far more potent brine of the sea. The hum of traffic was gone, replaced by the call of the red-winged blackbird and the yellow warbler.

Indeed, one beauty of a bike path is that you don't have to dodge SUVs and minivans on congested roadways, sucking up exhaust along the way. You can pedal at your own pace on an obstacle-free ride and savor the views. Yet, ironically, the Cape Cod Rail Trail was causing just as many problems as it was supposed to avert. Shallow running roots of the black locust and pitch pine trees were jutting up through the asphalt creating nasty bumps, some so notorious that bikers had names for them, like "the anaconda" and "the rattler." In Orleans, the trail suddenly ended, forcing folks to empty onto city roads lining Rock Harbor before meeting up with the path again. Then there was that far too steep descent into a tunnel in Eastham that wreaked havoc on novice and young riders.

Enter the state Department of Conservation and Recreation, which spent \$6.2 million fixing the trail these past two winters. They ripped out the old asphalt and poured in the new, extended the trail in Orleans so you have less biking on roads, made the descent into the Eastham tunnel more gradual, placed shoulders on both sides of the pavement for horseback riders and dog walkers, and replanted shrubs and trees. But according to Peter Noble-Cass, owner of a bike shop in Eastham, the most important improvement is the implementation of a new technology called root barriers.

"It's really a sheet of plastic that pushes the roots down deeper," says Noble-Cass, owner of Idle Times, one of a handful of bike stores located near the trail that supply rentals and gear.

Renovation on the first half of the trail was completed last summer. This winter, the DCR worked on the section from Nickerson State Park to the trail's Outer Cape terminus in South Wellfleet. While the official opening date is June 17, paving is complete and as smooth as Kevin Youkilis's pate. Stone benches and mile markers dot the 22-mile ride and landscapers are busy planting on the trail's edge.

A whopping 400,000-plus people use the trail annually and that number will surely increase with the freshly minted surface, but creating a recreational trail from this former railroad bed was no easy task. Once upon a time, the Old Colony and Penn Central railroads brought travelers from Boston, New York, and beyond to the beaches of Cape Cod. They would come for the summer, large trunks of clothing and other provisions in tow. Then, with the advent of the automobile and the unveiling of the Cape Cod Canal bridges in the mid-1930s, passenger service came to an abrupt halt. The trains would continue to haul cranberries and other freight to and from the Cape until the mid-'60s, when tracks were removed and the station houses razed.

A decade later, a handful of people in Orleans were wondering if they could do anything with the wasted space. The rail-to-trail movement was in its inchoate stages with little success. Pioneering advocates faced complex issues. Most importantly, who owns this land? Many railroad companies leased their property from federal and state governments, even private landowners whose homes were adjacent to the trail. Thus, on any given 5-mile corridor there could be a patchwork of 20 to 100 owners, none of whom was the bankrupt railroad company. Adding to this tangled web was the question of who's going to own and manage these trails when they go across political jurisdictions?

This was the sticky mess Sherman Reed stepped into when he retired from the military and agreed to become chairman of the Orleans Bikeways Committee. For the next eight years, Reed, working with his counterparts in neighboring Brewster and Eastham, was instrumental in the proposal and construction of the rail trail. He quickly learned that the Cape had a lengthy history of biking. At the turn of the last century, the only means of transportation on land was on horseback or two wheels.

"Knowing this, I thought we wouldn't have a bit of trouble in the world," says Reed, 79. "People would be flocking to the

idea."

Unfortunately, Reed was wrong. Locals thought that a trail would only attract hippies and drug dealers to the Cape. Building developers and hunting groups organized to quell the initiative.

"I still remember being demonstrated against, with 200 people waving flags in Brewster Town Hall . I'd go up and make a speech and there would be hoots and hollers. It was unbelievable," says Reed, adding that one of the most outspoken critics was the League of American Wheelmen, a biking group. "They were worried that if we built this proposed bike path of 16 miles, we would somehow legislate bicycles off the road."

Yet, Reed and his cohorts had their backers too, including the Army Corps of Engineers. When a group of Boy Scouts who were working on their Eagle Scout badge s cleared a portion of the railroad bed to show the trail's potential, public opinion began to turn in Reed's favor. Construction began in 1978 and the Cape Cod Rail Trail officially opened in 1979.

Reed says the trail didn't become popular until the late '80s. Initially, the pathway was a favorite of moped riders. Police began to give out \$200 tickets to the motorized bunch, who were terrifying the few bicyclists and walkers. In 1994, the route extended from Eastham to Wellfleet. Today, the Cape Cod Rail Trail is a bustling corridor of activity, from serious bikers yearning to do the 44-mile round trip in record time to young children learning to ride.

I think of the trail as the best way to travel the Cape, a chance to slow down and spend quality time with the family on an excursion to the beach or lunch. We like to take it in chunks, perhaps parking in Dennis and biking along the shores of three swimming holes, Seymour, Long, and Hinckley ponds, before we hit the Pleasant Lake General Store in Harwich for that requisite ice cream cone. On Main Street in Orleans, you can park next to Orleans Cycle and bike north through the salt marsh and ponds of Eastham, cruising through the tunnel to end up at a favorite lobster-in-the-rough joint, Arnold's . From here, it's an easy ride on Nauset Road to Coast Guard Beach (where you want to bike, because the small parking lot fills up early), connecting with the Nauset Bike Trail to the Salt Pond Visitors Center. Or continue north on the rail trail from Arnold's to reach Marconi Beach .

Other side trips include Nickerson State Park in Brewster , First Encounter Beach in Eastham , and taking the 4-mile spur from Harwich at the rotary (yes, even bikers have rotaries on the Cape) into Chatham. There are hopes to one day create a triangle between Harwich, Chatham, and Orleans that will loop back to the main trail, though Reed may sit that one out. For now his vision is a freshly paved corridor connecting six towns and keeping everyone, even former hippies and their grandchildren, happy.

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